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Understanding the linkages between violence against women and violence against children



Worldwide, it has been recognised that violence against women and violence against children are significant human rights and public health issues,^{1,2} with WHO describing violence against women as a “global health problem of epidemic proportions”.³ Globally, a third of women have been the victims of gender-based violence³ and over 1 billion children have experienced violence in the past year.¹ Furthermore, a quarter of all adults report being victims of physical abuse as children, with a fifth of women reporting being victims of child sexual abuse.⁴ This violence not only results in injury and mortality, but is associated with further health effects including increased risk of non-communicable diseases and reproductive, developmental, and mental health issues.^{4,5}

Effective and scalable efforts to address violence against women and violence against children have historically developed as parallel but separate fields with distinct funding streams, governing agencies, approach strategies, and bodies of research.⁶ Existing global research nonetheless demonstrates important intersections between the two that have significant implications for health programmes, policies and research.⁶ Emma Fulu and colleagues’ study in *The Lancet Global Health*⁷ is thus very timely, and is a major advance in understanding the pathways between violence against women and violence against children. Their analyses of the UN Multi-Country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific reveal a cycle of abuse, with child abuse leading to higher risk of violence against women and additional child maltreatment, which in turn increases the risk of adult violence.⁷ Overall, this study highlights that violence against women and violence against children can no longer be treated as distinct issues and that a deeper understanding of the pathways between the two are needed.⁷

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include two zero-based targets aiming to end all forms of violence against women and violence against children.⁸ In other words, every country that has committed to these global goals must not only reduce, but eliminate, violence against women and violence against children by 2030.⁸ Data collection and a clearer understanding of the complex inter-relationship of many factors

relating to violence are essential to achieving these goals. Currently, the research on violence against women and violence against children is overwhelmingly concentrated in high-income countries, with a dearth of information from low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs), including those of the Asia and Pacific region.⁹ Fulu and colleagues’ study makes important contributions by demonstrating that child abuse and maltreatment is highly prevalent among women and men in the general population across the Asia-Pacific region, while also pointing to the interface between child abuse and violence against women in a LMIC setting, which has also been found in previous research concentrated in high-income countries.⁶ These findings illustrate strong links between childhood experiences of abuse and the perpetration or experience of violence against women in adults, and that this cycle of violence is driven by gender inequality and social norms.⁷ Fulu and colleagues’ study recognises the importance of these macro-level factors with regard to both violence against women and violence against children and indicates that the environment in which a child develops is extremely important for violence prevention, complementing other emerging evidence on the drivers of violence.^{7,10} At this stage, many countries worldwide lack the necessary data to evaluate the progress of the SDGs¹ and this research not only provides data for the region but also offers much needed direction for prevention and intervention.

This population-based study demonstrates that interventions must change attitudes regarding violence in the home and society, promote positive parenting practices, and tackle the inequality that allows the normalisation of violence and patriarchal power over women and children.⁷ Violence does not occur in isolation and it is necessary to recognise the interconnectedness of its different forms as they often share common root causes.¹¹ This study not only indicates a need for cross-collaboration between researchers working in violence against women and violence against children, but also for efforts to address common risk factors and tackle social norms that support both forms of violence. This approach resonates

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with previous research which shows that interventions addressing the root causes and risk factors have the greatest potential for reducing multiple forms of violence and their detrimental outcomes.^{6,11}

While the conceptual framework and theory identifying the nexus between violence against women and violence against children have been established, how these multiple and complex intersections are addressed in practice remains under-researched. Future research must (i) identify opportunities and challenges across existing policies and programmes that straddle both fields, (ii) promote dialogue between violence against women and violence against children practitioners and policy-makers, and (iii) review evidence on what works to achieve mutually reinforcing results across both fields and scope opportunities for greater collaboration. These three areas of research could ultimately promote and accelerate achievement of the 2030 SDGs for eliminating both violence against women and violence against children. The science of public health is linked to action and the use of evidence to drive change, which is essential to achieving the basic human right of a life free of violence.³

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We declare no competing interests.

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